

Spelling & Penmanship

DRAWER 4

Education

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# Abraham Lincoln and Education

## Spelling and Penmanship

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

## The Youth's Companion

February 10, 1921

### LINCOLN'S "PROGRESS IN SPELLING"

POOR spellers may find comfort in the following anecdote that Mr. R. B. Stanton tells in the reminiscences of Lincoln that he gives in Scribner's Magazine. The experience was not Mr. Stanton's but his father's.

On one occasion, said the senior Mr. Stanton, the President gave me what he was pleased to call an account of his "progress in spelling." The incident reveals Mr. Lincoln's remarkable simplicity and open-heartedness. It shows, moreover, the ease and friendliness with which he could talk to a private citizen.

Having some business at the War Department and knowing that my success depended on the President's favor, I called to ask the President for his aid. At the interview no other visitor was present. After stating my case, I asked him if he would speak to the Secretary in my behalf.

"Certainly I will," said he. Pausing a moment, he added, "Or what is better, I will write him a note. Sit down, and I will write it now."

He went to his desk and began writing, but in a few moments turned to me and, looking up over his spectacles, said:

"Ob-sta-cle: is that the way you spell obstacle?"

I was so disconcerted at the sudden, unexpected question that for the moment I was silent. Noticing my confusion, he laid down his pen and turned his revolving chair so as to face me.

When I had recovered myself I said, "I believe that is right, Mr. President."

He then said, "When I write an official letter, I want to be sure it is correct, and I find I am sometimes puzzled to know how to spell the most common word."

When I remarked that that was not an unusual experience with many persons he said, "I found about twenty years ago that I had been spelling one word wrong all my life up to that time."

"What word is that, Mr. President?" I inquired.

"It is very," he said. "I used always to spell it with two r's—v-e-r-r-y. And then there was another word that I found I had been spelling wrong until I came here to the White House. It is opportunity. I had always spelled it op-per-tunity."

In relating those instances of his "progress in spelling," as he called it, the President laughed heartily and added some words on the importance of giving attention to orthography. Then he finished his letter to the Secretary of War and handed it to me, with a warm expression of hope that my mission might be successful. It was.

## Lincoln's Bad Spelling.

(Chicago Tribune)

Dr. Charles H. Coleman of Eastern Illinois State College, Charleston, notes that Abraham Lincoln was not much of a speller. He misspelled 60 words between the ages of 22 and 34. He wrote "very" 29 times in this period and also flubbed "beginning," "melancholy," "conferring," "deferred," "privilege," "repelled" and "prairie." At that, says Dr. Coleman, he could have spelled down most of today's high school students and plenty of college students. This we can believe.

Lincoln's trouble was that he was not exposed to the virtues of progressive education. He experienced no "felt need." He would have profited by learning from the core curriculum. His social studies would probably have acquainted him with the slave as a "community helper."

He would have met his teachers' requirements of adjustment in a social group, and, having achieved that, would not have been under any compulsion to spell correctly or to know much about anything. He would thus have been relieved of the obligation of making such contributions to literature as the Second Inaugural and the Gettysburg Address. Nobody, in fact, would ever have heard of him.

South Bend Tribune 2-12-54

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## ► DUNGEON OF DOOM

**TODAY:** 1717 South Calhoun St  
Kelley Buick. Times: 7-11 p.m. t  
and Wednesday-Thursday. Cost:  
470-8728. Recommended age 8

## Abe Lincoln's slanting strokes show there's more to a president's signature

**I**n the field of autograph collecting, as in any, there are extremes.

At one end is the grim scene at today's sports-memorabilia show, where an athletic superstar of faded glory sits signing like an automaton for a long line of fans willing to pay \$10 or more for this unique experience. And at the other might be Dan Weinberg, owner of Chicago's Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, who spends his days in happy authentication of Lincoln collectibles, particularly the 16th president's signature, the most sought-after of all historical John Hancocks.

A good Lincoln signature, clipped from a document, brings a solid \$4,000 to \$5,000, despite the man's prolific output in his lifetime.

"He signed everything," Weinberg said. "There's a huge amount of material out there." Enough so that forgers have had a merry time of it with the Great Emancipator's slanting "A. Lincoln," making Weinberg's authentication business all the busier. Weinberg will speak on "Forgers and Forgeries: A Dealer's Perspective" at the Lincoln Museum on Nov. 7.

Autograph collecting is no modern phenomenon, and forgers have been at work on Lincoln's signature almost since the gun smoke cleared in Ford Theater. In fact, Weinberg said, one of the first forgers to cash in on Lincoln was another Abraham Lincoln — the president's grandson. A coachman to Mary Todd Lincoln was another, but the most interesting frauds and forgeries connected to the president concern some of his best-known works.

The Bixby letter is one. Lydia Bixby was the mother of five sons, all of whom were said to have died in the Civil War. Lincoln wrote her a letter of condolence, which read in part:

"I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

"The original letter has been lost," Weinberg said. "But there was a forgery of the letter itself in



**Nancy Nail**  
*Telling Tales*

facsimile. The forger imagined what the letter might have looked like." In addition, it turned out the story of Bixby's loss was not true; none of her sons died in the war. This leads Weinberg to believe that the letter was probably written by Lincoln, "but there is some controversy."

The Bixby letter forgeries spanned the range of competence. Weinberg said he's even seen one on "letterhead" that carried Lincoln's picture. "That's ridiculous," he said. "No one had letterhead with photos on it then."

That's the sort of knowledge one must bring to the autograph-authentication field — not just a familiarity with your subject's own handwriting, but also with handwriting styles of the time, the types of paper, pens and ink in use, and a sixth sense for the subject. "If you have a copy of the Gettysburg Address written on parchment, it's a fake," he said. "They were using rag paper by then."

It's easy to understand the urge to forge. The collection of historic autographs and manuscripts boomed in recent years. "For years, autographs were the poor sisters to most collectibles, and were a great bargain," Weinberg said. Spurred by such high-profile collectors as Malcolm Forbes and Ross Perot, the market took off and only recently leveled out. Military commissions signed by Lincoln once sold for \$9,000 to \$15,000, outrageous considering "there are about 30,000 out there," Weinberg said. Prices have dropped to the more reasonable \$6,500 to \$7,500 range.

"Unlike paintings, historical figures don't go out of style," he said. "Once one makes one's mark, one is known. And Lincoln is world-known. In Americana, he's the most prized."

*Telling Tales* appears Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.



## Lincoln as a Speller.

[Robert Brewster Stanton in *Scribner's Magazine*.]

ON one occasion the President gave me what he was pleased to call an account of his "progress in spelling." The incident reveals the remarkable simplicity of Mr. Lincoln, and the open-heartedness of the man. It shows, moreover, his freedom of intercourse with a private citizen, divested of that stateliness of which some of his predecessors who have held his high office might have found it more difficult to relieve themselves.

Having some business at the War Department, and knowing that my success depended on the President's favor, and not being personally acquainted with the Secretary of War (Edwin M. Stanton and my father were not relatives), I called on the President for his aid. At this interview no visitor was present but myself. After stating my case and finding the President favorably disposed, I asked him if he would speak to the Secretary in my behalf. "Certainly I will," said he. Pausing a moment, he added: "Or, what is better, I will write him a note. Sit down and I will write it now."

He went to his desk and began writing, and in a few moments turned to me, looking up over his spectacles, and, without my having the least premonition of what was coming, said,

"Ob-sta-cle—is that the way you spell obstacle?"

I was so disconcerted at this sudden and unexpected question that for the instant I was silent. Noticing my confusion, he laid down his pen and turned his revolving chair so as to face me, when, having recovered myself, I said, "I believe that is right, Mr. President."

He then said, "When I write an official letter, I want to be sure it is correct, and I find I am sometimes puzzled to know how to spell the most common word."

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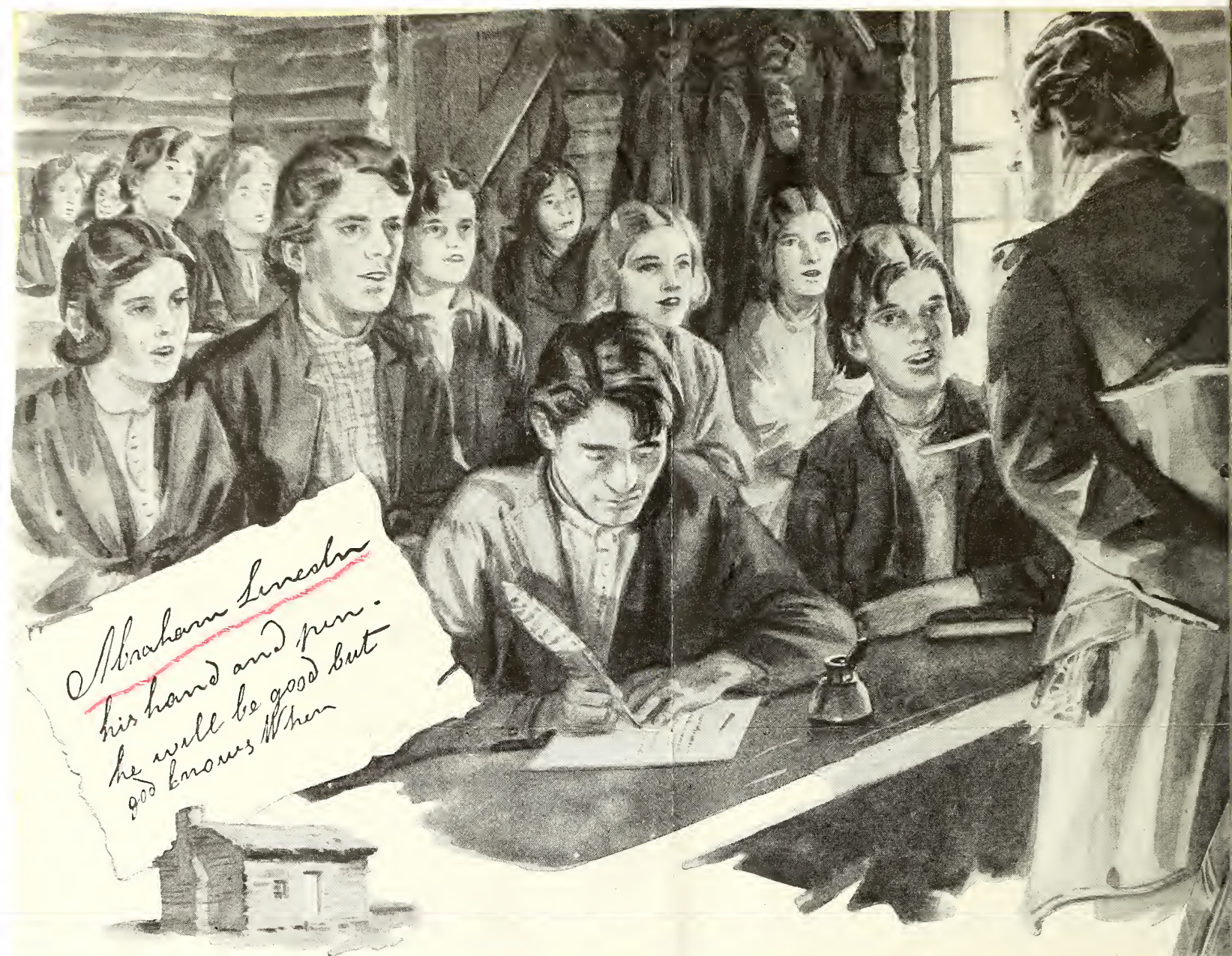
"It is *very*," he said.—"I used always to spell it with two r's—v-e-r-r-y. And then there was another word which I found I had been spelling wrong until I came here to the White House."

On my inquiry for the word, he said:

"It is *opportunity*. I had always spelled it op-per-tunity."

In relating each of these instances of his "progress in spelling," as he called it, the President laughed heartily, spoke of the importance of giving attention to orthography, and then finished his letter to the Secretary of War, and handed it to me with a warm expression of hope that my mission might be successful. It was.





## Young Abe larned pen writin'...

In old Kaintuck, the log-cabin "blab school" mentor with faith in "lickin' and larnin'" ... taught young Abe his a-b's and rudiments of pen writin'.

With turkey buzzard quills and ink of the wild brier-root or home-boiled sumac berries and oakbark, the boy did easy lines from the copy book. A few years later he penned long passages from Plato and the Scriptures, practised essay and elocution. As a young man, he served as a scribe for unlettered folk, wrote notes for neighbors to kin back in the mountains or the East.

Called by his country and by destiny to the Presidency, his able pen wrote documents that still live ... the Gettysburg Address, the Emancipation Proclamation, the letter to Mrs. Bixby, in which the heart not of a man, but of a nation, consoles a mother

for five sons dead... Few people realize that Lincoln's fame rests primarily on his ability as a writer.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN knew only crude writing aids ... the sharpened quills of wild fowl, the early iron and steel pens. Today statesman and schoolboy alike have an infinitely finer implement—the Inkograph ... precision-built, smooth flowing, fast acting, with its 14 kt. solid gold ball-like point that writes with the ease of a soft lead pencil. Costing little, it has the attractive appearance and fine workmanship usually associated with pens of higher prices.

Men in service prefer Inkographs. So if your dealer hasn't any, please try again.

*Inkograph on barrel or clip assures the genuine; sorry, no mail orders, only dealers can supply you.*

*Sat. Eve. Post Sept. 29*





